

ON THE INSIDE LOOKING OUT: An Election Administrator's Perspective (printed in magazine, IFES TODAY, May 2001 edition)

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Fallout from the November 2000 Election has resulted in misleading information about how elections are conducted and evoked simplistic ideas for solutions. This article aims to dispel some of the most common electoral myths that have arisen in the aftermath of the closest U.S. Presidential Election in over a century.

MYTH #1: All ballots are counted on election night.

REALITY: in the weeks following the November 7, 2000 Election, six million additional votes were counted for presidential candidates prior to certification of official results by the 50 states.

Election administrators must balance two goals that are fundamentally in conflict: the public's desire, fed by the media, for instantaneous **and** complete results on election night. In actuality, speed and accuracy are attained, but at different stages of the process. Speed is achieved election night with unofficial election results. However, accuracy must await certification of complete, official results. Although timelines differ from state to state, certification occurs within several days to several weeks following the election in order to tabulate additional eligible ballots.

The volume of ballots remaining to be counted after election night has increased tremendously in many states primarily due to easing restrictions on who may cast a ballot by mail. Verification processes differ from state to state, but signature checking is typically required for each absentee/mail ballot prior to opening, sorting and tabulating. In jurisdictions with large volumes of mail ballots, to finish these processes requires several days or weeks after election night. Additionally, some states have adopted extensive provisional voting procedures to segregate ballots cast by voters whose eligibility to vote cannot be determined at the polling locations and, therefore, require post-election research and resolution at the elections office. Also, many states have laws mandating extensive vote auditing procedures prior to certification. These include a variety of automatic recount procedures, and other double checks such as comparison of the number of ballots cast to the number of voters who signed-in at every precinct.

Rather than decry the delay, the public, including candidates and the media, need to recognize that these important **post**-election procedures enhance the integrity of the ballot counting process.

MYTH #2: The pervasive use of antiquated voting equipment is the problem.

REALITY: Although technology upgrades are definitely needed, election administrators know that electoral problems are multi-faceted and equipment is only one component.

Indeed, all vote counting equipment works perfectly in a laboratory setting. To offer viable solutions, reform proposals must address problems and errors associated with 1)

People (voters, poll workers, election administrators and staff, vendor personnel, candidates, and the media); 2) *Procedures* (vague and conflicting laws and inconsistent policies); and 3) *Technology* (outdated computer systems, voting equipment and tabulation systems).

MYTH #3: The United States should adopt one uniform vote counting system.

REALITY: One size does not fit all.

Even within one state, California for example, it makes no sense to assume an appropriate system for Alpine County with 771 registered voters would be the same as the technology needed for Los Angeles County operating under legal requirements to produce ballots in seven languages for 4,102,182 registered voters. Diversity of electoral equipment and multiple vendors strengthens the electoral system and fosters innovation. A single source of tabulation equipment and software could even be a target for manipulation.

MYTH #4: It is within the sole authority of election administrators to ensure proper conduct of elections.

REALITY: Multiple agency involvement is a major factor outside of the control of election administrators and results in compounding the instances of errors in elections. This problem is especially acute with regard to the role of states' Motor Vehicle Departments in voter registration and the U.S. Postal Service in absentee ballot delivery. Election administrators are frustrated by bearing responsibility for all electoral errors without having the authority to manage key components of the process.

#5 MYTH: Between 2-7% of the votes are "discarded" by election equipment.

REALITY: Overvotes and undervotes are completely distinct ballot characteristics.

An overvote occurs when more votes are cast in a contest than is allowable. Overvotes are due to voter confusion about the voting instructions. An undervote occurs when no vote is recorded for a contest. When examining undervoted ballots, the vast majority are clearly the result of voters intentionally skipping that contest. Only infrequently does an undervote occur due to a voter incompletely marking or punching a partial hole on a ballot. Therefore, aggregating these categories and interpreting ballots containing overvotes and undervotes as "discarded" ballots is inappropriate and misleading.

In conclusion, as the U.S. Congress and State Legislatures grapple with numerous proposals for electoral reform, solutions need to be crafted that address the complexity of problems election administrators confront in the search for the illusive goal of conducting "a perfect election."

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